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ABSTRACT

Intended for use by instructors of college level interpersonal communication courses, this paper offers examples of theoretical concepts of interpersonal communication that can be illustrated through literature and popular film. The first part of the paper discusses the criteria on which the selection of novels, plays, and films for the study of human interaction should be based. It then applies Abraham Maslow's five characteristics of the self-actualized person to the central character in the novel "A Separate Peace." The third part of the paper examines the theories of C. Hampden-Turner and V. Frankl as they are illustrated in the writing of author Willa Cather, while the fourth part applies the theories of psychiatrist R. D. Laing to the play "Equus." The fifth part discusses psychiatrist Thomas Szasz's theories as they are explored in the play "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" and applies the rational-emotive process described by Albert Ellis to the behavior in the novel and film "Ordinary People." The final section of the paper examines the film "Midnight Express" as being of little value in the study of human relationships, because it distorts the reality portrayed in the original book. (HTH)

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TEACHING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH NOVELS, PLAYS, AND FILMS

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William Faulkner believed that "art preserves life." He called for literature that explores the human spirit, a spirit that is "capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."[1]

Such literature can be one means of applying and illustrating theories of interpersonal communication. This paper will offer examples of theoretical concepts which can be illustrated through literature and popular film. The theories and applications cited in this paper are intended for college level instruction.

Selection of novels, plays, and films for collegiate study of human interaction should be based on two criteria. 1) These creative works should reflect reality, or "preserve life." The works must be honest, and contain sufficient depth to do justice to the subtleties and complexities of human beings. Flannery O'Connor reminded us that the purpose of literature and education is not to promote certainty, but to deepen our appreciation of mystery.[2] 2) These art forms should challenge comfortable assumptions and platitudes about human relationships--for there is a difference between normal behavior and natural behavior. Our task in studying human interaction is to search for whatever is natural, and such inquiry does not always produce expected or comfortable answers. James Karman recently commented in The Chronicle of Higher Education about the challenging role that art and education should play. Reflecting on a student's complaint that his college courses had made him uncertain about life, Karman writes: "The title of a poem by Wallace Stevens came to mind: 'Poetry Is a Destructive Force.' So is all serious thought; so is all serious teaching."[3]

The theories and interpretations suggested in this paper may be destructive to easy answers. Moreover, they do not provide new certainties--but attempt to raise questions which respect the complexity of human behavior. A collegiate course in interpersonal communication should do no less.

THEORIES OF ABRAHAM MASLOW APPLIED TO A SEPARATE PEACE

Abraham Maslow proposed five characteristics of the self-actualized person, based on his study of historical figures and his observation of exceptional students. He concluded that self-actualized persons have in common: 1) creativity, 2) spontaneity, 3) dedication to a vocation or task, 4) a clear perception of reality, and 5) a low degree of self-conflict.[4] Phineas, in John Knowles' novel A Separate Peace reflects these five characteristics.[5] But the portrait is not uncomplicated, and the need to weigh carefully the motivations and behavior of Phineas allows a realistic application of Maslow's ideas. Although this novel is often studied in high school literature classes, it is a book that yields insight equivalent to the experience a reader brings to it. The novel appears to be based in part on John Knowles' own experiences at Exeter Academy during World War II; and it is significant that he waited 16 years to fully describe a remarkable young man he calls Phineas. Possibly only a mature and self-actualizing person can accurately perceive or describe another who is self-actualized.

As described by Knowles, Phineas meets the first three criteria of self-actualization. He is creative in his invention of games without losers. He is spontaneous in acknowledging affection to his friend, Gene--an act which Knowles calls nearly suicidal in the atmosphere of a prep school. He

is dedicated to any task he undertakes--from athletic achievement to leadership in school activities.

The last two criteria are not so obviously illustrated by Phineas. His apparent denial that Gene shook the tree and caused his crippling accident may be taken as evidence that Phineas is unwilling or unable to admit reality. But possibly the self-actualized person is one who asks more difficult questions and achieves a clearer (albeit more complicated) perception of reality. The other boys at the academy, including Gene, are preoccupied with the question "what happened"--and are eager to assess blame. Phineas asks the far more difficult question: "why did it happen?" The answer he reaches is tempered by emotional and physical suffering, and cannot be dismissed as a superficial denial of reality. Phineas concludes that there are sometimes blind impulses in life, which (despite tragic consequences) are neither planned nor malicious. This insight may allow the self-actualized person to transcend revenge and absolve another from guilt--not out of foolish innocence, but out of wisdom about human imperfection. Maslow's last criterion (a low degree of self-conflict) also appears, at first reading, to be contradicted by Phineas. His efforts to enter the army in spite of his shattered leg, and his apparent desire to conform to war-time sentiments, seem in sharp conflict with his usual independent thinking and rejection of competition. Yet, from the title of the book to its closing lines, A Separate Peace may be seen as describing an underlying consistency in attitude and behavior. Had he entered the war, Phineas would probably have brought his blitzball game to the front lines--a game in which the players keep changing sides. Or he might have brought to the war zone the American Indian tradition of "counting coup"--

approaching an enemy close enough to kill him, only to touch his shoulder and turn away. Or, more literally, he might have been among the World War II infantry who went to the front lines, but declined to fire their guns. This would be consistent with his behavior at the academy when he breaks a swimming record without announcing it, and charms the faculty while skipping classes and escaping to the beach. A self-actualized person knows the rules, and can play by them--but may choose not to. The separate peace known by a self-actualized person may include the recognition that our greatest enemies are competition, suspicion, and guilt--and freedom from them is achieved in the mind, not on the battlefield. In his closing lines, Knowles writes: "All of them, all except Phineas, constructed at infinite cost to themselves these Maginot lines against this enemy they thought they saw across the frontier, this enemy who never attacked that way--if he ever attacked at all; if he was indeed the enemy."[6]

THEORIES OF CHARLES HAMPDEN-TURNER AND VIKTOR FRANKL APPLIED TO MY MORTAL ENEMY

A second author whose novels and short fiction offer particular insights into human behavior is Willa Cather. Her writings can be used to apply the theories of Charles Hampden-Turner and Viktor Frankl.

Charles Hampden-Turner has criticized the approach of traditional social scientists, who reach conclusions about human behavior based on averages and statistical norms. He believes this approach is common because it is relatively easy. Like the man searching for his lost wallet only where the light is best, social scientists often reach conclusions based primarily on the typical, majority behavior which is most visible. But there is a

difference between typical behavior and natural behavior--and Hampden-Turner urges the study of the exceptional individual who innovates, deviates, dreams, creates, and resists.[7]

Viktor Frankl witnessed exceptional human behavior during his years in Nazi concentration camps and believes that freedom and meaning are found through individual responses to life's conditions. Frankl offers a renewed importance to the word "responsibility" by defining it as "the ability to respond." Response-ability, even when facing the worst conditions and most oppressive constraints, is Frankl's answer to the behaviorist vision of conditioning, programming, stimulus-response, and behavior modification.[8]

Willa Cather came to similar conclusions from an artist's view as she explored and honored the exceptional person. She wrote from her own experiences and observations, and the reality of her characterizations is unmistakable. Through her short stories and novels, she spoke of the heroic (but never idealized) person--often in battle with surrounding conditions or his/her own lesser self. In the preface to Cather's novel My Mortal Enemy, Marcus Klein writes of her human portrayals: ". . . all struggled toward an image of poised and indisputable greatness, by which everything that cluttered, everything that was tawdry and cheap and small and restricting, would be subdued."[9] In My Mortal Enemy, Myra Henshawe is a flawed and eccentric woman--but she twice rises above tawdriness. As a young woman, she rejects the restrictions of her great-uncle's fortune in favor of her own choice of husband. As an old woman, she rejects the restrictions of poverty by spending her last coins on a Mass to honor the actress Helena Modjeska, and then secures a taxi to take her from her tenement room to see the ocean and the dawn before she dies.[10] Myra Henshawe reaches for her natural and best self in these acts, and perhaps

teaches us again that the "hero is just an ordinary person who, for a moment, isn't." William Bennett agrees that the exceptional person can be discovered and understood through literature when he writes: "Real heroes . . . may be fictional or factual as long as they possess qualities that we instantly recognize as true to human life and worth human attention."[11]

THEORIES OF R. D. LAING APPLIED TO EQUUS

R. D. Laing is a Scottish psychiatrist whose views have become known as anti-psychiatry. His writing and its applications are particularly relevant to lay students, because he contends that troubled behavior and breakdowns in relationships are too often turned over to "experts." Laing believes this leads to diagnosis, labeling, and treatment--when the real need is often for attention and affection, which are the province of all human beings, not just experts. Laing believes that the personality disorder labeled as schizophrenia is not a breakdown, but a breakthrough of the hidden inner self which has become so separated from the outer self that it abruptly closes like a screen door that is opened too wide. Laing believes that a person experiencing such a breakthrough needs support, acceptance, and reassurance--not treatment which is designed to restore the former outer self (a re-opening of the screen door). Laing also believes that human beings are capable of dealing with any reality, but not with hypocrisy. He suggests that unusual behavior does not mean a person is mad; possibly it is the world that is mad.[12]

Among the books which illustrate Laing's ideas are Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness (an autobiographical record of a recovered "schizophrenic" who lived in a community arrangement with Laing and others), and

I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (a fictionalized autobiography of a young woman who chooses reality over fantasy with the support of a psychiatrist who is modeled on one of Laing's colleagues).[13]

An additional work of fiction which allows exploration of Laing's thinking is the play Equus by Peter Shaffer.[14] The play describes the relationship between Martin Dysart (a psychiatrist) and Alan Strang (who is institutionalized after blinding six horses). It becomes clear that Alan's act was a breakthrough of frustration and anger in the face of religious obsession by his mother and sexual hypocrisy by his father. The lack of open and healthy family relationships leads Alan to focus his affection on horses, but he eventually transfers to them his rage at being watched and judged. Alan Strang's troubled mind is revealed not only by his violent act, but by his inability to respond to the affection of a young woman he cares for. Shaffer implies in his play that the psychiatrist should have helped Alan by offering him understanding rather than a "cure." But Martin Dysart's own inadequacies cause him to be threatened by the intensity of Alan's misdirected passion. He stands accused by Alan's words: "At least I galloped! When did you?"[15] Near the end of the play, this fictional psychiatrist acknowledges the flaw of psychiatry which Laing implies: "Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created."[16] The blurring of who is mad and who is sane, who normal and who abnormal, is complete when Dysart gives up the pursuit of a supportive interpersonal relationship with the boy and chooses treatment instead. Dysart's words in the last scene echo Laing's criticism of psychiatry. Dysart says: ". . . I'll set him on a nice mini-scooter and send him puttering off into the Normal world where animals are treated properly: made

extinct, or put into servitude, or tethered all their lives in dim light . . . . You won't gallop any more, Alan. Horses will be quite safe . . . ."[17]

If I Never Promised You a Rose Garden were studied along with Equus, the reader/student would perceive the contrast between a gradual progression into a healthy freeing relationship, and a regression into conditioning and treatment.

THEORIES OF THOMAS SZASZ APPLIED TO WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?

Thomas Szasz is a professor of psychiatry whose views also challenge the traditional premises of his profession. He believes that the imposition of laws against victimless "crimes," and the labeling of unusual behavior as sickness creates oppression of the individual.[18] Like Laing, Szasz recognizes that some people are genuinely troubled and self-destructive, but suggests that acceptance, support, and understanding are more helpful than the imposition of norms. Both Laing and Szasz carry to a logical extension Carl Rogers' philosophy of "unconditional positive regard."[19] Szasz argues that no behavior should be repressed by either legal or medical means as long as such behavior is not destructive to another person. But his rejection of legal and medical restraints does not mean the withholding of personal concern and influence.

Among the most controversial of Szasz's ideas is his contention that suicide is an individual's right. The implications of this idea are explored in Brian Clark's play Whose Life Is It Anyway?[20] This play explores the dilemma of a mature, intelligent man who is paralyzed when his spinal column is injured in an automobile accident. Because there is no hope of recovery and he does not want to live in that condition, Ken Harrison requests that

the life support systems be disconnected. In response to this request, the doctor diagnoses his patient as depressed and prescribes tranquilizers. Mr. Harrison argues that it is rational and even healthy to be depressed under such circumstances, and his need is not for tranquilizers--but the right to a dignified death. Eventually, the patient seeks legal aid (no easy task since all resistance to treatment is considered a symptom of depression requiring more treatment). Although this play is partially about medical ethics and legal rights, it is primarily about intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. It explores the reflections of a man whose mind, emotions, perspective, and even sense of humor, are intact--while his body is shattered. It shows the difficulty of responding to a double bind situation. It illustrates the difference between medical personnel who take care of a patient, and those who care for a fellow human being. Finally, it confronts the reader or viewer with the reality that a decision to die can be both rational and natural--and that acceptance of it has a place in human relationships.

THEORIES OF ALBERT ELLIS APPLIED TO ORDINARY PEOPLE

Like novels and plays, films can be a means of studying interpersonal communication. But, like other art forms, films provide insight only if they meet Faulkner's criterion of "preserving life." This criterion is met when the complexities of individuals and their situations are realistically and fairly presented.

A film which is based on a novel is two steps away from "real life," but it can still preserve and deepen our understanding of reality if that is the intention of the artists involved. The film Ordinary People succeeds in depicting reality. The novel by Judith Guest captures the breakdown of

communication within a family, and the film retains the authenticity of her novel--while providing additional visual and nonverbal nuances which increase our identification with the characters.[21]

The film can serve as a vehicle for studying the rational-emotive process described by Albert Ellis.[22] Ellis disagrees with B. F. Skinner's stimulus-response description of human behavior.[23] Instead, he suggests a three-step process: the activating experience, beliefs about the experience, and response. If the beliefs are irrational, the response is going to be destructive--but this unhealthy response is a result of the belief, not the original activating experience. Ellis believes that this A-B-C path can be re-channeled into an A-D-E progression in which a person makes a rational dispute of the situation, which can lead to a healthy response. In Ordinary People, the activating experience is the accidental death of the older son. Mother, father, and younger son all hold the irrational belief that someone is to blame. This shared belief leads to serious breakdowns in family relationships, although the unhealthy responses differ with each family member. The mother retreats into cold bitterness, the father suffers increasing frustration and depression, and the younger son Conrad is plagued by guilt because he survived the boating accident that killed his brother. Ellis's analysis can be applied not only to understand their attitudes, but to explore alternative attitudes. If each of the three could have rationally questioned the situation, each could have seen that it was a tragic accident for which no one was to blame. The resulting responses could have been healthier, shared expressions of grief and loss. The interweaving of art and life is underscored by the fact that Timothy Hutton, who plays Conrad in the film, read A Separate Peace as partial preparation for the role. An

understanding of Gene's unwarranted sense of guilt helped him to understand and create a similar response in the character of Conrad.[24]

The film Ordinary People also provides an opportunity to consider Jane Howard's view of families. In her research, Howard found that only 16.3 percent of this country's 56 million families are conventional nuclear families, with working fathers, homemaking mothers, and children at home.[25] The 1980 census confirms Howard's observations regarding the rapid decline in traditional husband and wife families.[26] But Howard suggests that "a nuclear family" and "a family" are not necessarily the same. She found many combinations of nurturing relationships which led her to conclude: "there are ways and ways of achieving kinship, of which birth and marriage are only the most obvious." By the end of Ordinary People, the traditional family has dissolved, but a new kinship has emerged which links a psychiatrist, Conrad, and his father. This kinship comes into being largely through the listening and acceptance of the psychiatrist, who offers what Martin Dysart in Equus could not: the risk of relationship instead of the safety of treatment.

AN EXCEPTION: MIDNIGHT EXPRESS

In contrast to the realistic insight provided by Ordinary People, the film Midnight Express is of little value in the study of human relationships.[27] The book on which the film is based is an important autobiographical account of a young man imprisoned in Turkey for possession of drugs.[28] Although the book involves political and legal themes, the primary story is the role of relationships in the survival of Billy Hayes. Hayes wrote the book in part to raise money to repay his father, who had made major financial sacrifices to visit and help his son. It is clear that out of this tragedy, there

developed a much deepened relationship between father and son. The book also discloses the importance of a young woman who visited and wrote to Hayes in prison. Finally, it describes the intimate relationship which developed between Hayes and another male inmate. The loyalty and affection offered in these three relationships sustained Hayes and strengthened him to survive and escape. This true account echoes the conclusion of Viktor Frankl that those who had loving relationships in their lives were more able to keep their spirits and bodies intact, and survive the conditions of the Nazi concentration camps.[29]

But the film Midnight Express distorts and almost denies the role of human relationships in Billy Hayes' survival. The film understates the importance of both the father and young woman, and gratuitously includes a scene in which Hayes rejects a sexual relationship with his fellow prisoner. This shading of truth, and outright contradiction of real events, results in a film which offers a very different conclusion from that of the book. The book tells us that Billy Hayes was sustained and strengthened by the love of three people. The film tells us that Billy Hayes was sustained and strengthened by a growing hatred of his oppressors. The lover revealed in the book is replaced by a hater in the film--a violent man who kills two people (events which never happened). The destruction of reality which is represented by this film adaptation is a reminder that truth is a prerequisite for art, and for learning.

CONCLUSION

Carefully chosen literature and film can help us to better understand and appreciate the intricacies of human communication. The best writers and

film makers accept Faulkner's challenge to go beyond the "ephemeral" and rediscover "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice."[30]

Theoretical analysis and creative insight are parallel paths to truth. Students of interpersonal communication are well served when theories are applied, and when those applications authentically "preserve life."

Notes

1. William Faulkner, "On Accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature," in American Short Speeches, ed. Bower Aly and Lucile Folse Aly (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), pp. 127-128.

2. Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 125.

3. James Karman, "If We Try to Blunt the Edge of a Great Idea to 'Protect' Our Students, Education Suffers," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 23 Mar. 1981, p. 64.

4. Frank Gable, The Third Force (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), pp. 27-29.

5. John Knowles, A Separate Peace (New York: Bantam Books, 1959).

6. Knowles, p. 196.

7. Charles Hampden-Turner, Radical Man (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), pp. 9-14.

8. Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963).

9. Marcus Klein, Introduction to My Mortal Enemy (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. vi.

10. Willa Cather, My Mortal Enemy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

11. William J. Bennett, "Let's Bring Back Heroes," Newsweek, 15 Aug. 1977, p. 3.

12. James S. Gordon, "Who is Mad? Who is Sane?" The Atlantic, Jan. 1971, pp. 50-66.

13. Mary Barnes and Joe Berke, Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); Hannah Green, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

14. Peter Shaffer, Equus (New York: Avon Books, 1974).

15. Shaffer, p. 94.

16. Shaffer, p. 124.

17. Shaffer, p. 125.

18. Thomas Szasz, "Our Despotic Laws Destroy the Right to Self-Control," Psychology Today, 8, No. 7 (December 1974), 19-29, 127; Thomas Szasz, "Therapeutic Tyranny," OMNI, 2, No. 6 (March 1980), 43.

19. Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 63.

20. Brian Clark, Whose Life Is It Anyway? (Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Company, 1974).

21. Judith Guest, Ordinary People (New York: The Viking Press, 1976); Robert Redford, dir., Ordinary People, with Mary Tyler Moore, Donald Sutherland, Timothy Hutton, Paramount Pictures, 1980.

22. Albert Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy: The Rational-Emotive Approach (New York: The Julian Press, 1973).

23. B. F. Skinner, Verbal Behavior (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1957).

24. Joan Burke, "A Talk with Not-So-Ordinary Hutton," The Des Moines Register, 18 Oct. 1980, Sec. B, p. 1, cols. 2-6.

25. Jane Howard, Families (New York: Berkley Books, 1978), p. 3.

26. "Census Figures Show 'Average' Home Has One Child or Less," The Cedar Falls Record (UPI), 24 Mar. 1981, p. 11, cols. 1-3.

27. Alan Parker, dir., Midnight Express, with Brad Davis, Columbia Pictures, 1978.

28. Billy Hayes, Midnight Express (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

29. Frankl, pp. 58-61.

30. Faulkner, p. 127.